



A TASTE OF RAIL HISTORY



The Orient Express exhibition features, among other exhibits, its locomotive and tender (above) and a carriage (top) of the train which started running in 1883. ST PHOTOS: JOEL CHAN, KELVIN CHNG

The Orient Express stars in a new exhibition at the Gardens by the Bay that showcases the luxury, mystery and romance of travel



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After the Once Upon A Time on the Orient Express exhibition made its debut in Paris in 2014, there were plans to bring the show to Singapore.

But the wheels were set in motion only two years later. Along the way, the organisers had to deal with administrative and cross-border challenges – and a global pandemic. This month, the Orient Express of France, the stuff of legend, finally pulled into Singapore and is stationed at the West Lawn of Gardens by the Bay – its home for the next six months.

More than 100 tonnes of the locomotive – with a carriage for carrying fuel and water in tow and two additional carriages – left Paris on

Nov 3 – marking the first time the Orient Express carriages are shipped overseas in the train's history of more than 100 years.

The exhibition, a culmination of talks since 2015 between the French and Singapore governments, opens today and runs till June 13.

Believed to be the largest of its kind in the world during the pandemic, the show is expected to attract at least 270,000 visitors. After Singapore, it will travel to China, Egypt and Venice.

Visitors will be greeted by an imposing 158-year-old green locomotive with an attached coal compartment that helped steam-power the train, which left Paris on its maiden journey on June 5, 1883, for Varna, Bulgaria.

From there, passengers heading to Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul) in Turkey had to make the rest of their trip by ship.

From June 1, 1889, the train started a direct route to Constantinople, which took four days and had stopovers at Munich, Budapest and Belgrade.

The trans-European coal-guzzling, steam-driven locomotives and luxury carriages were created by Belgian civil engineer Georges Nagelmackers, who founded Compagnie Internationale des Wagons-Lits, the company which owned the original Orient Express trains.

Mr Nagelmackers, born into a family of bankers, hobnobbed with European royalty and the elite and designed the ultra-luxe trains for big spenders.

Inside the pop-up tented exhibition area here, which features a facade styled to look like a 19th-

century Parisian train station, there are over 2,000 sq m of ephemera.

Two massive blue-and-gold carriages made of reinforced steel – a Pullman made in 1920 and a Fourgon in 1929 – take centre stage.

The interiors feature sumptuous Art Deco marquetry by French furniture designer and decorator Rene Prou and architectural glass panels showing Bacchanalian maidens by renowned sculptor of crystal and glass Rene Lalique.

In a separate replica of a dining carriage, haute cuisine will be served for lunch, dinner, high tea and Sunday brunch by three-Michelin-starred French chef Yannick Alleno.

Visitors can check out a sprawling museum boutique and an Orient Express Road Cafe, which makes coffee brews from places along Orient Express routes such as Baghdad, Aleppo and Cairo.

STEEPED IN HISTORY

The original Orient Express route in 1883 was from Paris across Europe through Strasbourg, Munich, Vienna, Budapest and Bucharest before ending in Constantinople.

Its sister train, the Simplon Orient Express, also travelled a route from Paris to Istanbul, but headed south through Lausanne, Simplon, Milan, Venice, Belgrade and Sofia before arriving in Istanbul.

The Orient Express has seen its fair share of history.

Apart from inspiring literary works such as Graham Greene's

Samboul Train (1932) and Agatha Christie's Murder On The Orient Express (1934), it has also been



involved in cross-border tensions and was even blown up by Nazi leader Adolf Hitler.

By 1977, the original Orient Express routes were retired after more than 100 years of storied journeys. In 1982, the Venice Simplon Orient Express started retracing the original Orient Express route and continues the service till today.

SIX-YEAR JOURNEY TO SINGAPORE

The exhibition was first held in 2014 in Paris in the courtyard of the Institut du Monde Arabe (IMA), or the Arab World Institute. It featured a locomotive and three carriages and drew more than 250,000 visitors over four months.

IMA, a foundation set up to promote Arab culture in 1981, is co-owned by the French government and 22 Arab countries that are

members of the Arab League. It is also one of the organisers of the Singapore show.

Other organisers include IMA president Jack Lang, 81; the exhibition's general commissioner Claude Mollard, 79; Orient Express Company vice-president Guillaume de Saint Lager, 36; and artist and executive producer Lydie Blandeau, who is in her 40s.

Mr Mollard tells The Straits Times the French organisers had tried to bring the exhibition here after its Paris debut.

"At that time, Ms Blandeau was already in Singapore," says the French arts administrator and author. "The then Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Lawrence Wong invited Mr Lang and myself. From there, the idea of organising the exhibition here sprang up."

It was not until last year that the organising team helmed by

Exhibition manager Sarah Djennadi (second from left) with exhibition producer Lydie Blandeau checking on the exhibits.

Nine things to see and do

1. The locomotive and tender

The locomotive with its tender, a trailing vehicle typically attached to a steam locomotive to carry fuel and water, was constructed in 1862. Loaned by Ajecta, the French association for reconditioning heritage trains, the locomotive and two cars – the Pullman and Fourgon, which were engineered in the 1930s – are considered France's national treasures.

Ajecta, or The Youth Association for the Maintenance and Preservation of Old Trains, is funded by grants from the private sector and the French government.

2. Boarding platform facade

Through a reconstituted train platform, visitors can relive the excitement of gathering at the train platform in Paris in the late 1800s, when the Orient Express would pull up at the station to begin its journey to Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul) in Turkey.

The 1889 return journey took four days, with stopovers in Munich, Budapest and Belgrade.

3. The Pullman carriage

The 1920 carriage weighs around 60 tonnes and needed the agreement of Gardens by the Bay to be set up at the site because of the complexity of handling and shipping to Singapore.

These carriages were built from the late 1800s based on a concept pioneered in the United States by American railroader George Pullman. Pullman trains offered more luxurious accommodation than ordinary mainline trains.

This carriage is on loan from Ajecta. It showcases memorabilia that give clues to the opulent lifestyles of the dignitaries and celebrities who boarded the Orient Express, such as America-born French entertainer Josephine Baker, novelist Graham Greene, celebrated Romanian socialite and style icon Princess Marthe Bibesco and Dutch exotic dancer and courtesan Mata Hari, convicted of being a spy for Germany during World War I.

4. The Fourgon carriage

"Fourgon" refers to a long covered wagon for carrying baggage, goods or military supplies. This car, which weighs 40.5 tonnes, will showcase memorabilia and the works of the late English writer Agatha Christie. One of her best-known books is the 1934 novel Murder On The Orient Express, which inspired several film and television adaptations.

A frequent traveller on the Orient Express, she wrote more than 60 mystery novels, mostly centred on fictional detectives, Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple.

5. The museum

This pop-up attraction retraces the romantic era of luxury travel via a wide collection of pieces from a bygone era, such as posters, menus, crockery, cutlery, suitcases, stained-glass windows and furniture.

Large displays of trunks address social, cultural and technical themes linked to the adventures of the Orient Express.

The exhibits are curated to evoke scenic stopovers on its route such as London, Paris, Venice, Istanbul, Aleppo, Damascus, Baghdad, Cairo, Luxor and Aswan.

Visitors can also watch documentaries and film clips that show the literary and cinematic legacy of the Orient Express.

6. The souvenir shop

Visitors can buy custom-made mementoes specially crafted for the exhibition such as luggage tags, miniature train models, tea cups and notebooks from the pop-up shop in the tented area. Prices start at \$1.50 for a postcard to about \$100 for a silk scarf.

7. Orient Express Road Cafe

Stop for a breather here and sample heady coffee blends that were discovered and made famous during the many stopovers on the original 19th-century Orient Express route. The cafe serves light snacks and pastries starting at \$7 and beverages priced from \$3.

8. Art Deco interiors

Elements of the Art Deco creations of French furniture designer and decorator Rene Prou and master of sculpted glass and crystal works Rene Lalique are showcased in the museum area, along with over 300 other artefacts from Paris.

Prou, who dabbled in designing wrought-iron furniture in 1929, went on to design the Orient Express' salon train carriages in the 1930s, creating intricate marquetry and other decorative art pieces to add to the train's art



An exhibit of a life-size model of a single sleeping carriage compartment decorated by Rene Prou (circa 1929).



Old luggage trunks (above) and an exhibit showcasing famous people who have travelled on the Orient Express, such as Princess Marthe Bibesco (left), a Romanian-French writer and style icon, are part of the display. PHOTOS: JOEL CHAN, MR DE GIGORD PRIVATE COLLECTION, FOND DE DOTATION ORIENT EXPRESS, ROBERTO FRANKENBERG



ONCE UPON A TIME ON THE ORIENT EXPRESS

WHERE West Lawn, Gardens by the Bay,

18 Marina Gardens Drive

WHEN Today till June 13, 10am to 7pm daily with

extended hours on some nights

ADMISSION Standard tickets start at \$25 for an adult, \$88 for a family bundle (two adults and two children), free for children below the age of three.

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INFO orientexpresss exhibition.com

nouveau-meets-contemporary vibe.

His acclaimed contemporary, Lalique, created architectural glass panels with sculpted male and female nudes, using a special molten glass technique he perfected for the interior panels in the Orient Express.

9. Pop-up restaurant with Yannick Alleno

The restaurant opens with high tea sessions from today. The romance of the 19th-century gourmet dining experience on board the Orient Express will be recreated in a replica of a dining carriage under the tented area by three-Michelin-starred chef Yannick Alleno (left), who worked with the organisers in 2014 on the inaugural exhibition pop-up in Paris.

Brunch, lunch and dinner will be available before Christmas, with details to be given at a later date.

Make reservations for high tea at

www.orientexpresss exhibition.com.

Prices for lunch (not available on Sundays) start at \$188, while dinner costs from \$298 (first seating at 6pm) and \$398 (second seating at 8pm).

There are also high teas and Sunday brunches, with prices starting at \$78 and \$250 respectively.

Beverages, wines and spirits are charged separately.



SCAN TO WATCH
Journey far away with the Orient Express. Go to str.sg/Jacz



Ms Blandeau fast-tracked the project after the key pieces – a locomotive and tender constructed in 1862 and two carriages – were secured for the exhibition.

She worked with Gardens by the Bay, Singapore Tourism Board and the French Ministry of Culture to iron out the administrative kinks.

The owner of Visionairs Gallery Asia, an art gallery in Capitol Piazza, says: "Since 2016, we have been facing many stops and challenges, but isn't this the purpose of a train? Stopping at a station before moving again."

"It became more challenging with the pandemic. Against all odds, the team pulled through to present an exhibition linked to travel, culture and gastronomy. I hope Singaporeans love it."

Mr Felix Loh, chief executive of Gardens by the Bay, says Covid-19 presented an especially tough challenge for the transcontinental

project at a time when international borders remain closed. "Having seen the exhibition take shape in the Gardens over the past few months – from the arrival of the locomotive and carriages to the recreation of the station – I have no doubt this extraordinary showcase will bring much delight to local visitors," he adds.

Mr de Saint Lager says the train, a national treasure of France, formed a symbol and bridge between the Western and Eastern worlds. "This dream of going ever further in the East was really the dream of Mr Nagelmackers," he adds.

"To me, it is very symbolic to have this first exhibition happen in Singapore."

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